

'Tobacco 21' policy contemplated in Niagara County

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October 30, 2018

Niagara County legislators are contemplating a local law that would ban sales of tobacco products to people younger than 21 years old.

At the legislature's business meeting earlier this month, Lockport High School students, school nurses and local physicians urged lawmakers to adopt a "tobacco 21" policy, arguing it would drastically reduce smoking rates and associated illness.

Dr. Andrew Hyland, head of Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center's tobacco control program, told legislators that one-third of cancer deaths result from cigarette smoking. According to the center, which strongly supports the proposed policy, over 95 percent of current adult smokers began smoking before age 21.

"Younger people are more susceptible to nicotine and more likely to get hooked when they try it," Hyland said. "The tobacco 21 policy pushes that age a little bit further, (so that) fewer young people will get hooked."

Lockport High School nurses and students argued that a tobacco 21 policy would leave teens with fewer social sources for tobacco.

According to a 2015 Institute of Medicine report, raising the age for tobacco sales to 21 would reduce youth smoking by 12 percent.

"We know that passing tobacco 21 will not completely erase the issue of tobacco use by young people, but we know it's a huge step in the right direction," said Nick Doxey, a junior at LHS and member of the Reality Check program.

Legislature Chairman Keith McNall said lawmakers will discuss a tobacco 21 policy in the coming weeks, calling it "very possible" the legislature could vote on such a resolution by its next monthly meeting Nov. 20.

"This is certainly a health concern. Smoking does hurt people, some tremendously," McNall said. "I think our county will make the right decision."

McNall would not say whether he personally supports a tobacco 21 policy, saying he wanted to do more research on the topic. However, he added, "I'm not opposed to anything that protects the people's health."

Niagara County Public Health Director Daniel Stapleton said he supports the proposal, saying research shows the average age of new smokers is just 13 in New York.

"The data shows if you can prevent someone from smoking while they're a teenager, it significantly reduces the chances they'll become a smoker," Stapleton said.

Should it adopt a tobacco 21 policy, Niagara County would be far from alone. Twenty-three counties and cities across the state, including New York City, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties, have raised the age for tobacco sales.

The policy has proven popular beyond New York. Hyland said that over 350 localities and six states have raised the minimum age for tobacco purchases to 21. And in those that have, he argued, retailers that sell tobacco have seen little impact.

In Needham, Mass., the first municipality to implement a tobacco 21 policy, not a single tobacco retailer went out of business a decade into the policy, according to Roswell Park.

Hyland said that's because 18-to-20-year-olds account for less than 2 percent of tobacco sales. "It's a small sliver," he said.

The calls for new tobacco sales laws come amid a sea change in youth tobacco use. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, teen tobacco use has been on the decline for 40 years. In 2015, 6 percent of high school seniors reported using tobacco in the past 30 days — down from nearly 25 percent of 12th-graders in 1997.

Meanwhile, teenage use of electronic cigarettes, colloquially known as "vaping," has reportedly exploded in recent years. The Centers for Disease Control's National Youth Tobacco Survey found e-cigarette use among teens increased from about 1 percent in 2011 to over 15 percent in 2015.

Electronic cigarettes allow the user to inhale vapor that often contains high amounts of nicotine. They are typically marketed as a smoking cessation tool, allowing smokers to wean themselves off of cigarettes by consuming vapor with decreasing levels of nicotine.

But reports show most teens who use e-cigarettes did not previously smoke cigarettes. Critics, including Doxey, say e-cigarette flavors like doughnut, Skittles and Fruit Loops appear to be marketed toward youth.

Last month, Food and Drug Administration commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb declared e-cigarette use among teens an epidemic.

And school nurses say the small size of popular e-cigarettes devices, such as Juul, combined with their lack of smoke, allow students to vape discreetly in school.

Nurse Regina Edbauer said students have been caught vaping in restrooms, classrooms and even once in administrative offices.

"Now you cannot even tell a student is smoking unless you have time to observe the individual student and know all the forms of e-cigarettes," LHS nurse Lynn Currie said. "Use of e-cigarettes has become an epidemic in our schools."

Most public health researchers consider e-cigarettes to be less harmful than cigarettes, but many say vaping is harmful enough to cause concern.

In 2014, Hyland and other researchers at Roswell Park found e-cigarette vapor contains carcinogens like formaldehyde and acroelin – and in some cases, in higher concentrations than in cigarettes.

And the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that teens who use e-cigarettes are far more likely to begin smoking cigarettes. About 31 percent of teens who use e-cigarettes start smoking within six months, compared with 8 percent of non-e-cigarette users, NIDA reported.

"These kids don't realize what they're doing and the effects they have," Edbauer said.